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SUBJ: RE-INVENTED FIJIAN OPPOSITIONIST CALLS ON AMBASSADOR

¶1. (SBU) Mahendra Chaudhry, one of Fiji's leading opposition figures who until recently served with the interim government, called on Embassy Suva to explain to Ambassador his newfound opposition to the interim government's electoral reform proposals, support for a new election timetable, skepticism regarding recent attempts at political dialogue, despair for Fiji's economic future, and concern for Fiji's continued participation in the Pacific Islands Forum. End summary.

ON ELECTIONS AND ELECTORAL REFORM

¶2. (U) Ambassador Steven McGann met for nearly two hours with Mahendra Chaudhry on November 10. Chaudhry, a former prime minister who was deposed by a civilian putsch in 2000, resigned in August as the interim government's finance minister to reclaim his leadership role of the Fiji Labour Party (FLP). The FLP is one of the two largest and most important political parties in Fiji.

¶3. (SBU) Throughout the cordial meeting Chaudhry repetitively called for elections and election reform, but with a different timetable and different reforms than those proposed by the interim government (IG). As a cabinet member, he strongly supported the IG's proposed common role system. He now sees it as doomed to failure, noting that under his understanding of the current proposal, the ballot would contain an unwieldy 112 candidates. Chaudhry believes strongly in a reform that combines two-thirds common role representation and one third communal representation, not unlike that proposed in the 1996 Reeves Commission report.

¶4. (SBU) Despite his recent close proximity to decision makers, Chaudhry is baffled by how the IG will make elections work logistically. He was emphatic that the country could not hold elections by the end of March 2009--as promised to the Pacific Islands Forum by Bainimarama in 2007--as first there must be an agreement on reform, then boundaries need to be determined and agreed to, and time must be set aside to consider electorate objections. Chaudhry felt, however, that elections could comfortably be held before the end of 2009, and suggested late November and early December as an excellent time, because school is out for the long southern hemisphere school break, and school facilities make for ideal polling stations.

ON POLITICAL DIALOGUE

¶5. (SBU) Ambassador emphasized the need for an inclusive engagement and discussion on elections that results in clear agreed-to timelines and benchmarks. Chaudhry agreed that timelines must be

fixed, but worried that the proposed President's Political Dialogue Forum (PPDF) might not happen as there has been no recent response from either the Commonwealth or United Nations. Chaudhry then quipped: "I don't know when we will talk seriously about elections."

¶6. (SBU) Ambassador noted that neither women nor nongovernmental organizations were represented in the recent preliminary political dialogue and asked Chaudhry for his evaluation of "interlocutors" Sitiveni Halapua and Robin Nair. Chaudhry said Robin Nair was too tainted by his association with the Charter but worked well with Halapua. He liked working with the more effective Halapua, as he understood the "Pacific way." He would like Halapua to communicate with Bainimarama and play a stronger, more facilitative and aggressive role. Chaudhry nonetheless felt that the preliminary political dialogue is nothing but a delaying tactic by Bainimarama to avoid discussing the real issues that need to be taken to the PPDF.

¶7. (SBU) Chaudhry strongly felt that the PPDF needs to happen as soon as possible. He worried that the inclusion of women's and civil society organizations in the PPDF would be a big mistake that would drastically delay the process of getting to elections. He urged that the PPDF focus solely on election reform and not include Charter discussions, which should be kept to the side.

ON THE PEOPLE'S CHARTER

¶8. (SBU) When asked about his views on the People's Charter, Chaudhry responded that the FLP has six main objections to the Charter, but of those six, two for him are paramount: electoral

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reform as proposed and the role of the military as nebulously defined in the Charter. In his view, the military needs to downsize, as there is no external threat to Fiji. He stated that the Charter is not a panacea, that the 11 pillars of the Charter are nothing new, that the inherent ideas have been proposed by political leaders in the past, many in the FLP's own manifesto. Chaudhry does not believe the Charter cannot be enacted or observed on a de facto basis without first being approved by a legally elected parliament.

ON THE ECONOMY

¶9. (SBU) With regard to the economy, Chaudhry feels the situation will continue to spiral downward, especially without the once-promised \$350 million of EU sugar money. Chaudhry appeared almost angry that so much of the national budget is spent on the military when there are such critical needs in health, education and other sectors. Ambassador cautioned that the IG must be careful with economic policies, warning that if Fiji loses a company like Fiji Water, it will send a terrible, irreversible signal to potential investors. (Chaudhry's ill-considered imposition of new and extraordinary taxes on Fiji Water nearly caused the company to close shop and was said to be the proximate cause of Chaudhry's dismissal as finance minister.)

¶10. (SBU) Chaudhry and FLP leaders have traveled and consulted widely throughout Fiji over the last several months. Chaudhry found that people want elections, feel they are living in a "vacuum," and that without members of Parliament to turn to, they despair of achieving any real progress. He discerned that young people frequently talk privately about the political situation but dare do so publicly. Chaudhry implied that many of his constituents have given up on Fiji and postulated that Indo-Fijians would decrease to 25 percent of the population within 20 years.

ON THE PACIFIC ISLANDS FORUM

¶11. (SBU) Chaudhry urged the Ambassador to work with the international community to take a position on electoral reform, be more assertive, and to collectively act through the Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat (PIFS) to make clear exactly what is expected of the interim government. Ambassador responded that he is not here as a consul and that the U.S. position is clear: until we have significant progress toward the return of democratic governance in

Fiji, sanctions will remain in place, there will be no expansion of Fijian participation in peace keeping operations, we will not consider any notion of exceptionalism, and we have and will continue to work through the PIFS.

¶12. (SBU) Chaudhry wondered what will result from Joint Forum Working Group scheduled to discuss Fiji on November 20, the Ministerial Contact Group proposed for later this month, and the special meeting of PIF leaders to be hosted by Prime Minister Michael Somare next month in Papua New Guinea. Chaudhry seemed genuinely concerned with whether the PIF would suspend Fiji from the PIF and noted that Bainimarama made a grave mistake by not going to Niue for the Leaders meeting in August.

¶13. (U) Ambassador suggested that they should meet regularly. Chaudhry was clearly interested and suggested that they should meet after he returns from India next month.

COMMENT

¶14. (SBU) Chaudhry seemed comfortable in his return to the role of political opposition leader. He has clearly changed his views since departing the IG in order to be more in tune with that of his constituents but seemed to be struggling with how far he could push his new-found views without seeming hypocritical. He is a seasoned political survivor with his finger on a larger social and political pulse. While the subject was not explicitly discussed, Chaudhry implied that there is much dissatisfaction in the Indo-Fijian community. To tap into that dissatisfaction while simultaneously assuaging both Bainimarama and the concerns of the indigenous community will require Chaudhry to use all of his considerable skills as a political chameleon. End comment.

MCGANN